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THE TRADITIONALISM OF ANCIENT RUSSIAN ART.

ABOUT a year ago, thanks to Belgian generosity, a great retrospective exhibition of Russian art was able to be held in Brussels. A very interesting fact made itself apparent as the result of this exhibition : it was observed that those non-Russians who visited the small room in which Russian icons were on view expected to find there " Russian primitives." Now, this is an entirely Western idea, born of a Western tradition and based on typical examples in the development of the arts in the West. It was a quite natural desire on the part of a people which has given to European art a whole series of talented primitives. The famous Flemish masters of the 15th and preceding centuries were, above all, initiators, seekers, inventors. They brought into the world a new experience, and, as a result, we cannot but feel the freshness of their works. The first thing that Belgian visitors to the icon room looked for was the link that bound this art to that represented in the rooms devoted to the 18th and 19th centuries. This link, however, does not exist : when they looked for individual initiative, freshness, originality, a certain suggestion of personal experience, they did not find it. They were looking for the Russian primitive in the Western and European sense of the word, but this primitive does not, and never did, exist.

The future of ancient Russian art was determined by the fact that this art was not the result of a creative fermentation of the unfettered forces of the national spirit and did not form itself gradually as a result of the slow accumulation of personal experience. Russian art was only a branch of Byzantine art transplanted on to Russian soil ; it was given in a finished state to our ancestors in the form of models sent to Russia, in the time of Saint Vladimir and Jaroslav the Wise, from Byzantium during the brilliant period of the Emperors of the Macedonian dynasty and of the Comneni.

A glance at its history will show that the 11th and 12th centuries were the " golden age " of Byzantium, the period of expansion. Byzantine paintings and mosaics, even then nearly

a hundred years old, decorated many of the churches and palaces in Constantinople. These wonders have not survived intact to our day, but we can judge of their splendour from the fragments which still exist in the mosaics of Daphni and from the works by Byzantine masters to be found in Venice and Sicily. The most ancient mosaics and frescoes in Russia, those at Kiev, Novgorod and Vladimir, date from this time. It is therefore not surprising to note that the Russian mosaics, frescoes and icons of this epoch, rare though they are, are entirely Byzantine. This does not mean that there were no artists of Russian origin among those who worked in the 11th and 12th centuries to beautify Russian churches ; on the contrary, the Russians worked with the Greeks, who were brought over from Greece by the Russian princes. But these Russians worked as far as possible according to the style of Byzantine painting. They knew no other and did not try to create one for themselves. It must be remembered that the Russians had only become Christianised at the end of the 10th century and that their cultural life had been derived from the Byzantines ; for it was from them that they took the elements of their law, their constitution and their literature. When it is further realised that they were engaged in building and decorating churches simultaneously in all parts of their vast territory—on the banks of the Dnieper, the Klyazma and the Volga, and on the shores of the Lake of Rostov—it is only natural that the example of Constantinople—the “Queen City,” as the Russians called it—should have been their guiding spirit and that the Byzantine influence should have been exclusive and dominant, leaving no room for individual initiative, personal experience and the freshness and originality of primitives. The old Russian master who wanted to depict in his icons and frescoes the scenes of the Christian legend had no other means of expression than that which he found already provided for him in Byzantine painting.

Hence arose one of the most curious facts in the history of Art—the unexpected Hellenism of ancient Russian art, as exemplified in Russian icons. This Hellenism was a relic of the Byzantine tradition. In the 4th and 5th centuries, when Byzantine art was made up of various elements, partly Hellenic and partly Oriental, that branch which aimed at portraying the human form, and more particularly painting, could only be founded on the Romano-Hellenic style. There is to be observed in the paintings of the Catacombs, dating from the first centuries of the Christian era, a certain irresolution as to the aims which

Christian painting ought to set itself to achieve. At one moment, symbolic and decorative tendencies prevail. But in the 5th century the fashion is all for the purely figurative : Hellenised Christianity was seeking the image of the Divinity, and, after the tremendously fertile and intensive activity of this remarkable period, a visual world came into being, a Christian world, Hellenic in appearance. At this time were created images of Christ and the Virgin Mary, portraits of the apostles and prophets, angels in delicate silhouette and scenes representing the chief events of the Bible and the Gospels. These images and scenes belong to that type of realistic art which takes its observations from the life, and is very Hellenic. But Byzantine painting did not allow any scope for the caprices and freely expressed ideas of the individual. During these years, which were marked by a bitter struggle in favour of the unity of the Church, it aspired to give a certain unity to all the various types of images. It created a canon for religious painting. Henceforward, the formal language of the new Christian art was subject to severe laws. Pictures of the Divinity and the events of the Holy Bible had to be constricted into rigorously determined compositions, invested with formulas as clear, laconic and precise as they were rhythmical.

The big historical rôle played by the Byzantium of the Comneni consisted in its bringing the Christian civilisation to the semi-barbaric Slavonic peoples. In the 12th century, Kiev was already a very populous, busy and wealthy town. It was justly proud of its many churches, decorated with mosaics and frescoes, of which the fragments preserved in the Church of St. Sophia and in the convents of St. Michael and St. Cyril are an example. The Church of St. Sophia at Novgorod also dates from the 12th century, as also do the frescoes in the little Church of St. Saviour at Nereditsa and in the Church of St. George at Old Ladoga, both situated in the district of Novgorod. The frescoes of the Cathedral of St. Dmitry at Vladimir, dating from the end of the 12th century, are even more remarkable and are quite well preserved. The superb Byzantine paintings recently discovered in Serbia and Bulgaria, in the churches at Nereža, Mileševo, Sopoćani, and Bojana, have the same origin.

The brilliant civilisation of the Kievan epoch was swept away in the whole of Central Russia by the terrible Mongol invasion about the middle of the 13th century. On the other hand, in North Russia, and particularly in the Novgorod district, the end of the 13th century and the whole of the 14th were marked by

an important outburst of architecture and painting, which has left us many frescoes and quite a large number of icons. This phenomenon was simultaneous with the expansion of painting in the Serbian churches in the 14th century, a fact which has been established by the labours of M. Gabriel Millet.

The surprising thing about this ancient art of the Slavonic countries, these icons and frescoes painted in Russia and Serbia during the 12th, 13th and 14th centuries, is the obviously Hellenic derivation of their traditions, which were thus inherited by people who had historically no right to them. To Byzantium, the heir to the great Hellenic and Roman Empires, which had preserved the language, literature and, to some extent, the philosophy and science of the Ancient World, these traditions were natural. In the Slavonic countries, and especially in Russia, Hellenism was adopted with Christianity, and because of it. The above-mentioned external image of Christianity, which was formed in the 4th and 5th centuries and completed and brought to perfection by Byzantium, remained therefore partly Hellenic. Such was the path that the religious imagination of the Russian people was destined to follow from the very beginning. It was offered a ready-made formula, sanctified by its great age and its saintly origin. Russia only knew Christianity under this Hellenic aspect chosen and developed by Byzantium. It was only in the 17th century, at a time when relations were being opened up with the West, that Russia was able to free herself from these images which had become canonical and sacred to the Russian people.

It is difficult for Westerners and Europeans to grasp these ideas which are so alien to them ; but that is not to say that they are Asiatic or Oriental ideas. Although it assimilated many Asiatic and Oriental elements, Byzantium was never Asia or the East in the ordinary sense of the word. But also it had no place in the cycle of European cultures of the Middle Ages, which created the Roman and Gothic styles in art. Byzantium might be described as an over-long *finale* to the Ancient World, its Christian *post scriptum*. A European cannot bear this alliance of a new thought with an ancient form ; the new Westerner—whether sculptor or painter, Flemish or Italian primitive—struggled for several centuries and found a new form for new things.

But Russia, which had had no other connection with antiquity and had no memory of Hellenism, was initiated in a singular way by Byzantium into the cycle of Hellenic culture. He who would study Russian icons will see images of Christ and the

Virgin which have no Russian trait in the faces, and apostles of a type which goes back to the orators and philosophers of old, clothed in the Greek *himation* and *chiton*, and winged angels with ribbons in their hair, like genii taken from an altar of victory. He will observe a countryside of small mountains such as the inhabitant of the immense Russian plain had never either seen or imagined. He will notice that the most ancient Russian icons, up to the 15th century, represent constructions entirely unknown in Russia: columns, porticoes, atriums, with the red curtain or *velum* above. Finally, he will see in all the images a grace of movement and of pose which exactly recalls ancient bas-reliefs—the rhythmic succession of figures in the procession of Deisis, the perfect balance of compositions elaborated and fixed by a skilled art. All this is the Byzantine tradition, the precious gift of Hellas, transmitted with Christianity to the Russian people.

This Hellenic art, by existing for centuries among the Russian people, whose historical vicissitudes it shared, became Russian art: it expressed the deepest beliefs and contained the best of the intimate life of the people. It became so far a part of this world of Hellenised Christianity as to be its national expression. Isolated up to the 15th century from all influence of Western art and culture, it contented itself with images and figures which had succeeded in making it, barbaric and unsophisticated as it was, part of the great historical cycle of Hellas.

In the 11th and 12th centuries, the princes, the Court and the governing classes were under the direct influence of Byzantium. By the 14th and 15th centuries, on the other hand, this influence passed rather into the domain of reminiscence and as such was jealously guarded by the Church, which directed the work of the painters called to serve it. By preserving the traditions of Byzantine art, the Church achieved the preservation of the Hellenic tradition, which remained strong and active in monumental painting.

But, in spite of this aristocratic art, which set an example from above, the voice of the people made itself heard more and more strongly; the influence of popular art became more and more potent, expressing the tastes, ideas and customs of the common man and the northern peasant, who had inherited in such an unexpected fashion, not only Byzantine Christianity, but images and forms taken from the pagan world of distant, meridional Greece.

It is no exaggeration to say that the Russian people has been, all through its history and right up to modern times, a people

extremely gifted in respect of the artistic and creative imagination of its popular and rustic art. The Russian peasant has always loved to decorate the modest interior of his home, and at one time Russian peasant art enjoyed a well-merited popularity in Europe. Most readers will remember to have seen specimens of the wood sculptures with which the Russian peasant decorated the interior and even the exterior of his *izba*—the windows, doors, seats, etc. They will recall the woven materials, or the women's dresses and head-dresses ornamented with gold, or the domestic utensils so fancifully decorated—sculptured distaffs, hackles, vessels and toys. The Russian peasant has given expression in the ornamentation of all these objects, in all this picturesque folk-lore, to a great freshness and originality of taste, a love of design and of splashes of vivid, harmonious colours. He has shown that he is a first-class ornamenteer, a talented decorator, an inventor of new motifs and of combinations and applications of these motifs. Attention must be drawn to this fact because it helps to explain the history of ancient Russian painting. It explains first of all how the Russian people was able to assimilate the distant images and forms of Byzantine art, which had been in their turn borrowed from Hellenic art. There is no doubt that these forms and images never meant as much to the ordinary Russian as they did to the Hellenic master of the 4th and 5th centuries, to whom they were reality itself, or to the Byzantine master who was bound to them by the age-long tradition of his race, his language and his culture. It was impossible that these images and forms should have any representative meaning for the ordinary Russian : for him, they simply acquired a meaning at once symbolic and decorative.

These images of Christ, of the Virgin Mary, the apostles, saints and prophets, their appearance, their costume, their poses and gestures, were not his own handiwork. All he could do was to repeat them faithfully, setting himself not to change in any respect their traditional and holy appearance. But, at the same time, the Russian artist could not limit himself to the rôle of a mere copyist. He was charmed by the art which supplied him with these images, but he interpreted it in his own fashion. He did not catch at all well the meaning of the essential part of Byzantine painting—namely, its realism ; but he did grasp, appreciate and feel its decorative side, which fitted in with his own deeply engrained instincts. The pure rhythm of Byzantine composition became the principal theme of ancient Russian painting. Byzantine painting was interpreted by the Russian

masters as symbolic in its content and decorative in form. In the 4th and 5th centuries, when it was evolving out of Hellenic art, Byzantine art had neither of these qualities ; in spite of the Oriental elements in its composition, Byzantine painting had never lost its realistic and figurative character, and in all its works (the mosaic of Daphni in the 11th century, the mosaic of Kahrie Djami in the 14th century, the very rare icons of this period, and even the frescoes executed by Byzantines on Russian territory, as those of the Vladimir Cathedral) are to be seen figures whose types are the result of real observation treated according to the method of ancient Hellenic expressionism.

In this connection, it is interesting to recall that when similar Byzantine forms and images penetrated into the West—in Italy, Flanders, the Rhenish provinces and Burgundy—at the time of Charlemagne, or, later, of Roman art, the painters, sculptors and miniaturists of the Middle Ages were especially struck by the realistic side of Byzantine painting. The Italian, French and Flemish sculptors wanted above all to see the real world through the images which came to them from Byzantine art, and they wanted to see it with their own eyes. Even in the period when they were strongly under the Byzantine influence, the Western masters gave a free and personal interpretation of the figures and compositions which they copied. They gave to biblical personages characteristics observed in real life, they replaced the ancient clothing, which was unknown to them, by that which was worn around them, and changed the unknown Hellenist landscapes for those of their own country. They only wanted to depict things which existed in reality around them.

Their imagination was turned towards the world and Man, and they could not be satisfied to follow the Byzantine example and depict a non-existent antique world and the Greek shadows which had lived in it. The West had created a new man, and this man, seeking a new reality, aspired also to find a new way of giving expression to this reality. The Italian and Flemish primitives had advanced beyond the Byzantine-Hellenic realistic method and created out of it another, which was the realistic method of European painting.

Russian art developed in quite a different way. The Russian people possessed a fertile but very abstract artistic imagination, only capable of creating decorative and ornamental styles. As mentioned above, they did not understand the essential realism of the Byzantine-Hellenic system, but, contrary to the Western European, they did not even try to replace it by a realistic system.

of their own. They only assimilated the purely abstract elements of the forms and images which came to them through Byzantium from Greece and were alien to them. They looked upon figurative Byzantine painting as a simple variation of ornamental motifs, having a symbolic meaning. The Russian primitive was therefore not a primitive in the Western sense of the word. Its rôle in the historical arena consisted in the gradual development of Byzantine painting, which was figurative, monumental, realistic and aristocratic, into a popular art, which was rustic, decorative and unsophisticated.

The history of the painting of Russian icons is an example of the reciprocal action of these two elements : Byzantine tradition on the one hand and peasant art on the other. In the 14th century Russian icon-painting strongly affected the monumental style, but, beside this aristocratic type of icon, there began to appear the popular type. In the 15th century, the Byzantine tradition and the Russian decorative tendencies were in a state of happy equilibrium, and this was one of the best moments in Russian icon-painting, which gave to the world such a master as Andrew Rublev, with his famous icon of the Holy Trinity. Fifteenth-century icons are still on the whole faithful to the Byzantine tradition, not only in their firmly constructed compositions, but in their types, costumes and fantastic landscapes of mountains and Hellenistic architecture. In the 14th and 15th centuries the unique decorative type of the Russian wooden icon was formulated and became characteristic of the Russian church. It is well known that the Byzantine churches of the previous period had a low partition, generally made of stone. A very characteristic fact was the way in which Russian art was able to unite the symbolic theme of the iconostase with a purely decorative function. To achieve this, it developed the traditional Byzantine image of Deisis—the Holy Saviour between the Virgin Mary and St. John the Precursor. These three panels were placed in the centre of the Russian iconostase, beneath the holy doors leading to the altar. But on the right and left, the Russian masters added two archangels, two apostles, two Fathers of the Church and two martyrs, a whole sequence of majestic figures forming the “chin” converging towards the centre of the iconostase and detaching themselves as slender silhouettes on a golden or bright-coloured background. Above this group was another, in which the most important feasts were represented, and yet above this the Holy Virgin Blacherniotissa, surrounded by the prophets holding scrolls of the prophecies.

The essential type of the Russian iconostase remained unchanged in the 16th and 17th centuries, but the style itself of the icon underwent important modifications. The Byzantine tradition made itself less and less felt, and Russian painting, left to itself, lost its beautiful monumental character, the slenderness of its silhouettes, the rhythm of the lines, the purity and harmony of the colouring. All the same, it cannot be said that the art of the 16th and 17th centuries was without its own qualities, especially from the historical point of view ; it is perhaps even more national in character than that of the 15th or 14th century. Sixteenth-century art is increasingly permeated with the tastes and mentality of the people. The Russian master of the time of the Moscow Tsars hastened to rid himself first of all of the Hellenistic landscape, which had been all along incomprehensible to him. At the beginning of the 16th century, the traditional little mountains had become merely an ornamentation, without the slightest semblance of representative value. Hellenistic architecture with its porticoes and atriums, incomprehensible to the Russians, was replaced by the reality of Russian churches with their cupolas. The white walls of these churches and their architectural lines furnished a new ornamental motif for Russian icons. At the same time, many icons represented Russian saints and episodes in their lives : St. Sergius of Radonezh, St. Cyril of Beloōzersk, St. Barlaam of Chutyn, St. Leontius of Rostov, and many others, furnished subjects for the Russian masters, subjects which were certainly not bequeathed to them by Byzantine art. Such icons permitted the development of talents which the people had always possessed, everywhere and in a high degree, for legend and folk-lore. In depicting the life of the Russian saints, the master found it necessary to reproduce also all that surrounded him, so that types, clothing, temples, landscape, all were Russian. Some of these icons, dating from the period which followed the death of the saint, even bear a resemblance to the original.

It is especially during the second half of the sixteenth century, in the reign of Ivan the Terrible and Boris Godunov, that icon-painting is found more and more to contain the characteristics of rustic art and themes borrowed from real life. The Russian master, a man of the people, used these elements for his decorative compositions. At the end of this, and the beginning of the next, centuries, efforts were made to perfect the art of icon-painting, and artistocratic studios were set up. In these worked the Tsar's official masters and those who were employed by rich persons

such as the Strogonovs. These attempts resulted in the appearance of a certain number of icons characterised by extremely careful workmanship, and in the creation of the miniature icon, very finely worked and richly set with gold. But the result of these efforts was not to give a new life or new resources to art, nor to assure it equilibrium against the onslaught of Western influences, which began to circulate in Russia during the reign of Tsar Alexis Mikhailovich in the middle of the 17th century. Engravings and the printed and illustrated bible were the forerunners of this tendency, and in the numerous churches in Yaroslavl, dating from the second half of the 17th century, are to be seen paintings inspired by those in the Dutch bible of Piscator. But a really interesting feature is that the Russian masters gave to these motifs, borrowed from the West, a purely decorative interpretation, bright in colours and amusing in design, after the style of peasant art.

With the complete disappearance of Byzantine traditions, popular art remained the only living source for the decoration of the churches. But at the end of the 17th century this art also came to an end, for European influences spread rapidly over Russia. From the reign of Peter the Great, Russian art enters upon a new historical period and takes its place in European development. At the same time, it broke away from Hellenistic civilisation, to which Byzantium had so strangely allied it in the 11th century, in spite of the natural conditions and the style of life of the Russian people, and even in the face of its future development. It has been shown that this artificial union was contrary to the instincts and the nature of the people, which gradually transferred and eliminated these Hellenistic forms and images inherited from Byzantium. And yet these forms and images were for so long a part of the life of the Russian people and became so well established in its consciousness that they are an indivisible part of Russia's spiritual property. Russian Christianity was always in its external aspect a Hellenised Christianity. That was the way in which Russia was joined to the great civilisations of antiquity. Russia did not experience the Renaissance, nor, unfortunately, the fruitful enthusiasm of the generations which dug out of the earth antique statues and aspired to read Greek manuscripts. But as long as the Byzantine tradition was maintained in Russian art of the Middle Ages, echoes of the Hellenic world continued to make themselves heard.

PAUL MURATOV.